

This PDF includes a chapter from the following book:

The Politics of Dating Apps

Gender, Sexuality, and Emergent Publics in Urban China

© 2021 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

License Terms:

Made available under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International Public License

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

OA Funding Provided By:

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding from Arcadia—a charitable fund of Lisbet Rausing and Peter Baldwin.

The title-level DOI for this work is:

[doi:10.7551/mitpress/12742.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/12742.001.0001)

APPENDIX: METHODOLOGICAL REFLECTION

In this methodological reflection, I provide details of my field trips and elaborate on the methodological and ethical challenges I encountered in the process of recruiting informants and interviewing.

FIELD TRIPS

I conducted two separate field trips to Guangzhou to collect data for this book. The first field trip took place from August to December 2016. All my interviews with straight dating app users were conducted in this field trip. The second field trip, focusing on queer dating app users, was conducted from July to September 2018.

CHALLENGES IN RECRUITMENT

Recruiting informants for this study was not an easy task. Thinking that there was no better way to contact dating app users than reaching out to them via the apps, during my first field trip, I first set up a “researcher’s profile” on two mainstream dating apps, Momo and Tantan. During my second field trip, I did the same on two popular gay dating apps, Blued and Aloha. I crafted the profile so that my academic identity and the

purpose of the research were foregrounded (see figure A.1). On Momo and Blued, which do not require mutual liking to start a conversation, I sent out one round of recruitment messages to people near me, containing the purpose of my research. The responses to my initial recruitment messages fell into three categories. Some users were interested in my research and signed up for it. Others stopped replying to me after learning more about the research. One particular user from Momo accused me of using “academic research” as a pretense for *yuepao* 约炮 (hooking up). I apologized and ceased to contact her. Still others, which were the majority, did not reply to my message at all. Considering that typical dating app users might not expect to be approached by researchers on the apps,



Figure A.1

This was my researcher’s profile on Tantan. Left: Following my name “Sam Chan” is a phrase indicating I was on the app for conducting my dissertation research. Right: I explain my intention to look for interview informants and list the criteria for participating. (Screenshot taken by the author on November 28, 2016)

I did not want to cause too much disturbance for them, and I decided not to send any follow-up messages. At the same time, on Momo and Blued, I regularly posted via the “status updates” feature—which contained my research purpose—so that the users around me could become aware of my project without my having to send unsolicited messages to them. I waited for people to contact me. This passive method attracted only one person who volunteered to participate in my research.

I suspected the low participation rate from the methods above was due to the one-way push of the recruitment messages. Looking for research informants is similar to looking for a romantic partner on dating apps—both require mutual interest. Therefore, I switched my recruitment platform to Tantan and Aloha, which have the “swipe” feature. I basically liked every profile that appeared on my app and sent out a recruitment message to those who also liked my profile, presuming that those who liked my profile were interested in my research after reading it. Through these platforms, I successfully recruited around half of the straight female informants and some queer male informants.

Second, I attended a public lecture on women’s sexuality given by Dr. Pei Yuxin from Sun Yat-sen University, Guangzhou, and I recruited participants from the audience. Dr. Pei is a sociologist of gender and sexuality studies. She was kind enough to introduce me to her audience and allow me to hand out leaflets on my research. In this way, I recruited another half of the straight women and some straight men.

Because Guangzhou has an active LGBTQ support network, my third channel for recruitment was through LGBTQ organizations. I contacted the person in charge at Tongcheng 同城 (the Gay and Lesbian Campus Association in China) and Qinyouhui 亲友会 (Parents, Families, and Friends of Lesbians and Gays of China), respectively. They helped send out recruitment messages to their members and volunteers. I recruited half of my queer male informants and most of my queer female informants in this way. I did not register the accounts on any lesbian apps because these apps explicitly prohibit men from joining them (see figure A.2).

Finally, many informants, after our interviews, were willing to invite their friends to participate in the study. These informants sent out invitations, which I drafted, to their friends. I waited for responses. Most of my

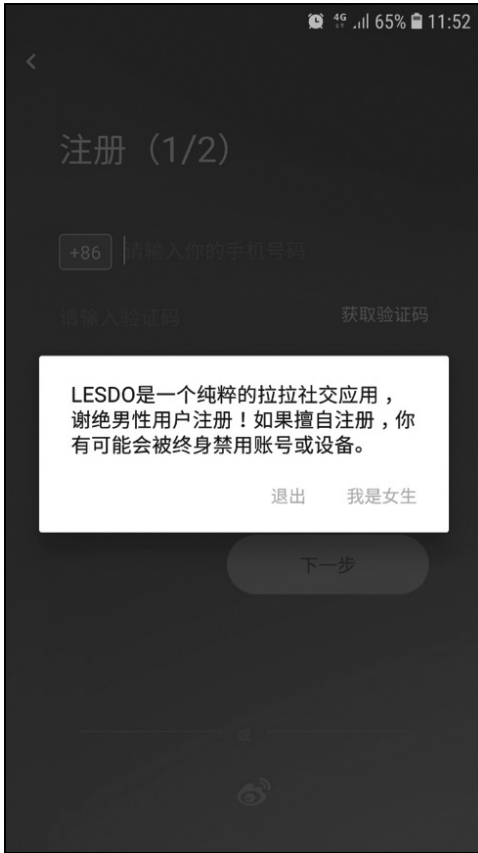


Figure A.2

Lesdo, a dating app tailored for queer women, explicitly states that the app is only for *lala* 拉拉 (lesbians) and does not welcome any male users. (Screenshot taken by the author on July 18, 2018)

straight male informants were recruited in this way. To protect the informants' identities, I did not cross-check who had referred whom.

In total, I interviewed sixty-nine dating app users. While there is no a one-size-fits-all rule for the number of informants needed in a qualitative study, researchers have pointed out that the number depends on factors such as the homogeneity of the group (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006) and saturation of knowledge (Bertaux, 1981). Within each group, my informants were relatively homogeneous: all of them identified as

ethically Chinese, except one informant, Anthony, was three-quarters Chinese and one-quarter Indian but had lived his life completely as a Chinese; they were living in the same region; and most of them were born in the 1980s and 1990s. Further, I was able to recognize some patterns in my informants' narratives and experiences after conducting a dozen of interviews within each group. My time in city also allowed me to conduct additional interviews to ensure knowledge saturation.

Concerning the recruitment and sampling processes, I have two things to note. First, my experience of recruiting people for my research demonstrated that trust and rapport are crucial. On Momo and Blued, sending unsolicited messages to strangers who had no prior relationship with me barely helped me get them on board. However, people responded fairly positively when they were referred by either friends or organizations that they trusted or when they were interested in my research after reading my profile on Tantan and Aloha. Second, qualitative research like mine that is based on convenience or snowball sampling does not look for observations that can be generalized to the entire dating app user population. Instead, my informants' experiences with dating apps offered me insight so I could theorize the gender and sexual dynamics in the digital context.

ETHICS IN INTERVIEWS

As I point out in the main text, interviewing is a social process. Understanding that the interviews could involve personal and socially sensitive issues, the informants also determined the venues where they wanted to meet. Most people picked a public yet quiet coffee shop or restaurant. Some decided to use their offices.

Interviewing also involves a power relationship between the researcher and the informant. How to present myself became the first major concern in conducting the interviews. I selectively highlighted different aspects of my identity to make my informants feel more comfortable sharing their views and experiences related to sex and love online. Michael Schwalbe and Michelle Wolkomir (2003) remind us that, to a male informant, "an interview situation is both an opportunity for signifying masculinity

and a peculiar type of encounter in which masculinity is threatened” (p. 57). They argue that the nature of academic interviewing—requiring the informants to follow the lead from the researcher, to self-disclose, and to reflect on their own past behavior—often puts men in an uncomfortable position. So to men, I often said, “Since I don’t know how people behave in China, because people in Hong Kong or the United States are different, why don’t you tell me. . . .” By foregrounding my foreignness, I let my informants play the role of “experts,” giving them some control over the conversation.

Shulamit Reinharz and Susan Chase (2003) are concerned with the power relationship between a male researcher and a female informant, especially when gendered experiences were the subject. Likewise, Travis Kong, Dan Mahoney, and Ken Plummer (2003) raise a similar concern regarding straight researchers and LGBTQ informants. Some feminists have suggested that researchers self-disclose to reduce the distance between themselves and their informants. I followed this practice by sharing my experiences on dating apps with my informants. Whenever it felt appropriate, I foregrounded my sexual orientation to my straight female informants and my queer informants. Although Hongwei Bao (2018) describes Guangzhou as “one of the most queer-friendly cities in China” (p. 15), given that being gay is still not totally accepted by the majority of Chinese (Bao, 2018; Kong, 2011; Zheng, 2015), I was not comfortable disclosing my sexual orientation to my straight male informants. I was afraid that this would turn them away or damage my authority. To them, I focused on myself as a man. Whenever these male informants asked about my hookup and romance history, I shared with them without explicitly mentioning the gender of my partners by using the word *keoi* 佢, which is a gender-neutral pronoun in Cantonese, or the word *ta*, which can be interpreted as either 他 (he) or 她 (she) in Putonghua.

The second concern I want to point out is the nature of my interviews. I would describe my interviews as ethnographic, aimed at revealing the emic views of dating app users. However, my research is not ethnography. Rooted in anthropology, ethnography requires researchers to immerse themselves in the everyday lives of their informants. Some anthropologists even advocate experiencing what their informants normally do,

including having sex with them if the research topic is related to sexuality (McLelland, 2002). Esther Newton's (1993) discussion of the erotic equation in ethnography reveals the presence of intimate relationships between researchers and their informants. I studied the experience of using dating apps, but I did not engage in in-app interactions with people I met on these apps beyond the recruitment stage. This was my deliberate choice because I believed that experiencing what my informants did, such as flirting on these apps, would jeopardize my professional identity and create inappropriate expectations on either side (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). Therefore, I was very careful to indicate to my straight female informants and queer male informants that our meeting would be completely professional, and I foregrounded my researcher's identity in both the online conversations and face-to-face encounters.

DETAILS OF INFORMANTS

Table A.1 provides details of the sixty-nine informants who generously shared their experiences with me.

Table A.1 Details of the informants at the time of interview

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|---------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Straight women (interviewed in 2016) | | | | | | | |
| Rosy | 21 | Tantan | Single, never married | | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Chloe | 23 | Momo, Tantan | Dating | | Bachelor's | Graduate student | Low |
| Brady | 23 | Tantan | Single, never married | | Associate's | Interior designer | Midrange |
| Xiaolan | 23 | Tantan | Having a close emotional and sexual partner overseas but not defined as a boyfriend | | Bachelor's | Graduate student | Low |
| Amanda | 24 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Graduate student | Low |
| Queenie | 25 | Tantan | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Studio assistant | Midrange |
| Nikki | 26 | Tantan | Dating | | Secondary school | Salesperson | Midrange |
| Jessica | 27 | Momo | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Civil servant | High |
| Nancy | 28 | Tantan | Single, never married | | Secondary school | Internet merchant | Midrange |

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|----------|--------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Xiaoshan | 29 | Momo | Married | | Secondary school | Masseur | High |
| Polly | 29 | Momo | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Translator | Midrange |
| Xiaojiao | 30 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Immigration consultant | Unstable |
| Fanny | 31 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Administrative assistant | Midrange |
| Katie | 33 | OkCupid, Tinder | Single, never married | | Master's | Civil servant | Midrange |
| Kangqi | 34 | Tantan, OkCupid | Open relationship | | Bachelor's | Writer | Unstable |
| Coco | 34 | Tantan | Married | | Bachelor's | Garage owner | Midrange |
| Jennifer | 37 | Momo, Tantan | Single, divorced | | Bachelor's | Administrative assistant | Midrange |
| Yiping | 38 | Momo | Married | | Bachelor's | Doctor | High |
| Wenwei | ^c | Tantan | Single, divorced | | Bachelor's | Financial consultant | ^c |

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|-------------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Straight men (interviewed in 2016) | | | | | | | |
| Xiaoli | 19 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Xiaolong | 20 | Momo | Single, never married | | Associate's | Exhibition worker | Midrange |
| Roy | 21 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Secondary school | Watchmaking apprentice | Low |
| Taibai | 24 | Momo | Dating | | Bachelor's | Trade executive | Midrange |
| Nathan | 25 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Master's | Marketing executive | High |
| Fred | 25 | Momo, Tantan | Dating | | Associate's | Tourism officer | Midrange |
| Anthony | 28 | Momo, Tantan | Married | | Secondary school | Theme park manager | High |
| Jiazhi | 28 | Tantan | Single, never married | | Bachelor's | Office executive | Midrange |
| Clement | 28 | Momo, Tantan | Dating | | Bachelor's | Bank officer | Midrange |

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|----------------------------------------|-----|-----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------------|
| Dylan | 29 | Momo, Tantan | Single, never married | | Associate's | Electronic developer | High |
| Victor | 30 | Momo | Dating | | Bachelor's | Civil engineer | Midrange |
| Eric | 31 | Momo, Tantan | Married | | Secondary school | Vehicle technician | Midrange |
| Alan | 32 | Momo | Dating | | Master's | Civil servant | High |
| John | 36 | Tantan | Married | | Doctorate | Lecturer | Midrange |
| Fung | 36 | Tantan | Single, divorced | | Bachelor's | Café owner | Midrange |
| Bob | 37 | Momo | Single, divorced | | Bachelor's | Property manager | Midrange |
| Queer men (interviewed in 2018) | | | | | | | |
| Chung | 19 | Aloha | Single | Male <i>tongzhi</i> | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Xiaomao | 19 | Blued, Aloha | Single | Gay | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|----------|-----|--------------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Xiaoming | 21 | Blued, Aloha | Single | <i>Tongzhi</i> | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Ginger | 22 | Aloha | Having a "weekend lover" | Gay | Bachelor's | Photographer | Low |
| Rice | 23 | Aloha | Single | Gay | Bachelor's | Lawyer | Low |
| Gui | 23 | Blued, Aloha, Tantan | Having a regular sex partner | Queer | Bachelor's | Unemployed | Low |
| Allen | 24 | Blued, Tantan | Single | Gay | Bachelor's | Health and safety officer | Midrange |
| Tesla | 24 | Blued, Aloha | Single | Gay | Bachelor's | Software engineer | Midrange |
| Green | 24 | Blued, Aloha | Single | Gay | Associate's | Communication executive | Low |
| Ezra | 24 | Blued, Aloha, Fanbaizi, Tantan, Momo | Single | A man who desires another man | Bachelor's | Civil engineer | Low |
| Damon | 25 | Aloha | Single | Gay | Bachelor's | Market researcher | Midrange |

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|--------|-----|------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Mali | 25 | Blued, Aloha | Single | Queer | Bachelor's | Graduate student and lawyer | Low |
| Norman | 26 | Blued, Aloha | Single | Homosexual/gay | Master's | Education consultant | Midrange |
| Yuan | 26 | Blued | Single | Gay/male homosexual | Bachelor's | Education consultant | High |
| Lasong | 26 | Blued | Dating | Male <i>tongzhi</i> | Bachelor's | Banking executive | Midrange |
| River | 26 | Blued | Single | Gay | Bachelor's | Laboratory technician | Midrange |
| Johnny | 27 | Blued, Aloha | Dating | <i>Tongzhi</i> | Bachelor's | Marketing executive | Midrange |
| Huajun | 28 | Blued, Fanbaizi | Dating | Gay | Bachelor's | Personal trainer | Midrange |
| Jerry | 28 | Blued, Tinder, OkCupid | Single | Queer | Bachelor's | Computer scientist | Low |

Continued

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|------------------------------------------|-----|------------------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Queer women (interviewed in 2018) | | | | | | | |
| Amy | 18 | Rela | Dating (with a man) | Bisexual | Secondary school | Telephone debt collector | Low |
| Alina | 19 | Rela, Soul | Single | Bisexual | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Magda | 19 | Rela | Single | Female homosexual | Secondary school | Undergraduate student | Low |
| Xiu | 23 | Rela | Single | Lesbian | Associate's | Unemployed | Low |
| Shawn | 24 | Rela, Lesdo | Dating | Queer | Bachelor's | Branding executive | Midrange |
| Xiaoyan | 24 | Rela | Single | Lesbian | Bachelor's | Real estate agent | Midrange |
| Charlie | 24 | Rela, Lesdo | Dating | Lesbian | Associate's | Social worker | Low |
| Xi | 24 | Rela, Lesdo, Lespark, Tantan | Single | Bisexual | Master's | Counselor | Midrange |
| Dada | 25 | Rela, Lespark | Dating | Bisexual | Secondary school | Real estate agent | Low |

Table A.1 Continued

| Name | Age | App used ^a | Relationship status | Sexual identity (applicable to queer informants) | Education | Occupation | Monthly income ^b |
|----------|-----|-----------------------|---------------------|--------------------------------------------------|------------|---------------------------|-----------------------------|
| Alex | 26 | Lesdo | Dating | Queer | Bachelor's | Advertising copywriter | Low |
| Xiaoqing | 26 | Rela | Single | Female <i>tongzhi</i> | Bachelor's | Real estate investor | High |
| Shushu | 26 | Rela, Lesdo | Dating | Queer | Master's | Lecturer | Low |
| Jamie | 26 | Rela | Dating | Female <i>tongzhi</i> / lesbian | Bachelor's | Construction supervisor | Low |
| Becky | 34 | Lesdo, Lespark | Dating | Bisexual | Master's | IT maintenance technician | Low |

Notes: a. These are the apps that my informants had been using three months prior to my interviews. b. Low: CNY5,000 (~USD725) or below; midrange: CNY5,001 to 10,000 (~USD725 to 1,450); high: CNY10,001 (~USD1,450) or above. c. Wenwei declined to disclose her age. My guess is that she was in her mid-forties. She also declined to disclose her monthly income.

